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SUBJECT: GAZA HUMANITARIAN UPDATE, JANUARY 16, 1700 HRS

REF: TEL AVIV 0121

¶1. (SBU) Only the Kerem Shalom crossing was open on January 16; it handled 76 truckloads of supplies and three fuel tankers. In the wake of yesterday's firefight around the UNWRA compound in Gaza and destruction of its main warehouse, UNWRA did not operate its usual cargo convoys from Kerem Shalom to Gaza City. UNWRA is still assessing the extent of its losses at its Gaza City compound. Apart from a few sacks of flour and the fuel tankers, everything else in the warehouse was destroyed, including the blankets USAID had procured from OFDA. The IDF discouraged NGO/IO north-south movements between Gaza City and the Rafah crossing on January 16. If UNWRA restarts its convoy operations on Saturday, the GOI has committed to open Kerem Shalom, otherwise it will be closed as is normal on Saturdays. The Karni crossing was to have been opened on January 16, but mechanical problems with the conveyor resulted in nothing being sent through to the Gaza side. Karni, too, could be opened on Saturday if the conveyor has been repaired and trucks are available on the Gaza side to move product. Fuel storage on the Gaza side of Nahal Oz remains nearly full, so the GOI did not open Nahal Oz on January 16. It does not intend to open Nahal Oz on Saturday.

¶2. (SBU) ICRC has ceased escorting foreign evacuees in the face of mounting criticism from Gazans that such efforts detract from meeting the urgent needs of Gazans who have no place else to go. Embassy Tel Aviv secured UNWRA agreement to assist with evacuation of foreigners from Gaza, provided that the evac could be done as part of the daily cargo convoy from UNWRA's Gaza City compound to Kerem Shalom. Embassy has also started the ball rolling with Shin Bet and MOD to secure a GOI decision to permit our remaining FSNs in Gaza and their families to be evacuated to the West Bank. Emboffs met with JCR Chief Baruch Spiegel afternoon of January 16, accompanied by USAID and UNWRA reps, to secure his support for a Kerem Shalom evacuation. Spiegel is willing to help, but used the occasion to encourage UNWRA to consider running a combined cargo/evac operation directly through Erez. UNWRA leadership still fears that delay in moving through that crossing makes its convoys a target for Hamas mortar or rocket fire. The last effort to run an UNWRA cargo convoy through Erez ended with an UNWRA driver being killed by Israeli tank fire. We expect a decision from UNWRA on the Erez option late evening of January 16.

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